

Easter Sermon

Matthew 27:57-28:15

April 12, 2009

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I've decided that Easter Sunday is both the easiest and hardest day on which to preach. It's easy to preach on Easter because, well, it's Easter! Frankly, it's hard to mess this one up. And even if I do mess it up, it's Easter! It's a day of forgiveness and new life and resurrection. I tell you, not even a bad sermon can squelch the joy of this day, but I'm going to try not to test that theory today.

This is also a hard day to preach. Not just because most of you are probably already thinking about Easter dinner, although that might be true. I understand the purpose of preaching to be about education and inspiration. But this is Easter, and there's nothing I have to say that can educate you about the mystery of the Resurrection, and no words I offer that can even come close to the inspiration of "He is risen!" What do you preach on Easter that can top that?

Martin Luther said, "Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime." Creation does such a better job of educating and inspiring. When the weather starts to warm up, the flowers bloom, the trees bud, the birds sing, whose spirit isn't lifted up? The resurrection of creation each spring is its own sermon that far exceeds anything a preacher has to say on Easter Sunday. But this is my job, my calling, and so here I am, trying to find words to say to you about something that is indescribably joyous and altogether incredible.

As a former journalist, my first instinct is to explain what happened on Easter morning. I love digging into a biblical writings and studying the historical context in which it was written, the culture of ancient times, the meaning behind the author's intent. In most cases, the Bible is wonderfully rich source of study. I like taking a "let's get to the bottom of this" approach to the Bible passages.

But in this story, there's not much we can explain. In fact, even the people who experienced it couldn't explain it. The women are scared out of their wits. The disciples are flabbergasted. And the religious leaders are so stunned they concoct a half-cooked cover-up to try and make sense of a rolled-away stone and an empty tomb. They give the soldiers some hush money and tell them to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." The religious leaders figure this blatant lie will be enough to fool the local governor, which shows that Roman politicians and Illinois politicians might have had a lot in common. The disciples are responsible for this hoax, the resurrection didn't really happen, and Jesus stays dead, where it's a lot easier to keep him under control.

Of course this story is ridiculous and full of holes. Let's cross-examine, shall we? First of all, if this stone was so big, wouldn't the guards hear the disciples rolling it away? For the soldiers, the penalty for falling asleep while on duty was death. Would they dare risk their lives, and would they all fall asleep at once? And if they were asleep, how do they know the disciples stole the body? These disciples, who didn't have the guts to attend the crucifixion, now are supposed to have had the courage to steal a body from a well-guarded tomb? For me it's easier to believe in the Easter Bunny than it is to believe this conspiracy theory.

But I don't blame the religious leaders for trying. After all, their faith and their way of living were at stake. If the only explanation for what happened on Easter morning is that Jesus really was resurrected, that means they have some serious crow-eating to do. They've spent the

last few years hounding Jesus, trying to discredit him, attempting to trip him up with trick questions, and finally resorting to false allegations and violence to get him out of the way. If it turns out that this guy Jesus really was who he said he was and the Jewish religious leaders backed the wrong horse, somebody is in trouble. So they do what they can to keep Jesus dead, because that can be explained.

What a contrast between the chief priests and the women at the tomb. When the women see the empty tomb and encounter the resurrected Jesus, they don't pull out their reporter's notepad and start asking questions. "So, Jesus, how do you feel? Was dark it in there? Are you rested?" No, they fall at his feet in worship. Yet when the priests hear what's happened, they try to make sense of it, and that desire for an explanation becomes a stumbling block to their belief.

Wanting an explanation is human nature. It would seem that if there's Someone greater in charge of all of this, then life must somehow make sense. If we can explain the resurrection, then we can explain everything about life. But life doesn't make sense. I don't see how anyone could read the Bible or the Easter story and come away thinking it paints a picture of a world that makes sense. Nothing about Jesus' life makes sense. The virgin birth, the healing stories, multiplying the loaves and fish, his patience and forgiveness, his willingness to die on the cross. None of that makes sense. It's not supposed to. If we can't explain his life and his death, then we certainly can't explain his resurrection.

I know it would be so much easier to believe if we had concrete evidence to explain what happened on Easter. But the reality is that if we need tangible proof of the Resurrection in order for our faith to be meaningful, we don't have much to work with. None of the four gospels describe the resurrection. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – none of them tell us what happened when Jesus was resurrected. All we are told is the after-effects: the empty tomb, the angel, the frightened women, the appearances of a risen Christ. It's like a Looney Tunes cartoon where Bugs Bunny is staring down the barrel of Elmer Fudd's gun. One moment Bugs is there, and the next moment he's gone, with only a few puffs of smoke and squiggly lines where he used to be. We didn't see him actually leave; we only see the after-effects.

In fact, the only evidence that we DO have is the empty tomb, the ultimate after-effect. Some would say that's the basis for some faulty logic. We are trying to prove the existence of something by saying what's not there. We believe if the tomb is empty, then Christ must be risen. And yet for 2000 years, starting with the chief priests, people have been trying to draw some other conclusion that makes sense, that doesn't require them to let go of logic and reason and just believe. But we can't escape the fact that the tomb is empty. He's not in there.

Sitting here this morning, we are again confronted with the after-effects of resurrection and like the chief priests, we are given a choice. To believe or not to believe. To accept or to try and explain it away. I believe that to embrace and worship a living Christ, like the women did when he appeared to them, we have to live in light of the resurrection's real impact on our lives and our faith. If Christ is still dead in this story 2000 years ago, then Christ is still dead today.

But I believe the resurrection not only was real back then, but it is real today, and that reality compels us to live our lives with a resurrection perspective. Nothing in our lives can help us make sense of the resurrection; instead, it is the resurrection that can help us make sense of our lives. Sometime life is so brutal, so unfair, that it ONLY makes sense when seen through the resurrection. Whether it's dealing with our aging parents, the loss of our job, or a battle with illness, the empty tomb puts all our sorrow into perspective when we know that because Jesus lives, we can face tomorrow. The promises of the resurrection are real and they belong to us when we give up our attempts to understand and simply worship.

The concern with not believing the resurrection happened the first time is that we then don't believe it can happen again. We have no expectation of resurrection. If you don't believe in the resurrection, what are you expecting today, this most holy of days? Are we expecting – yawn – another Easter? Or are we expecting resurrection? Are we expecting something important to come back to life – our dreams, our hopes, our strength to endure challenges, our broken relationships? A resurrected Savior is one that can bring dead things back to life – dead ends, dead opportunities, even a dead faith.

We can stay rooted in the past, fretting over the historical validity of the resurrection. We can stay rooted in our own past, fretting over things we've done, beating ourselves or others up for past sins. But Matthew's account makes one thing very clear without a doubt: Jesus is not back there.

Author John Purdy said, "God is not in the past, shut up in the tomb of our sins, our youthful indiscretions, our wasted opportunities, our shattered hopes and dreams. God is ahead of us – in our future, out there freeing us from our past, easing the pain, feeding the hungry, making for peace, washing the feet, raising the dead. God is gone ahead of us and he is out there waiting for us to get moving."

Do you want proof that Jesus rose from the dead? OK, I've got proof. Look around. You are the evidence of the resurrection. You are the after-effects. You are the proof that Christ is risen and alive and at work in this world. When you live with a resurrection perspective, when you allow the strength of Christ to be your strength and the love of Christ to be your love, when you endure and persevere and overcome through your faith in Christ, you become proof of his vibrant power, you testify to his living grace. When you expect resurrection in your life, your life becomes a testimony that shouts, "He is risen!"

The tomb is empty. Christ has risen. He's calling us forward as witnesses to his resurrection. Are we just going to sit here? Or are we going to get moving?